

Dreadful Monsters or Self-sacrificing Parents?

Satanic Characters in Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*

Zsuzsanna Tóth*

University of Szeged, Hungary

Abstract

Within a close transtextual inheritance of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793) starring Satan, Philip Pullman's contemporary fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), retells the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall of Man in order to criticize the grand narrative of Christianity. From the theoretical position of myth criticism, the paper proves that on the one hand, in Pullman's mythopoesis the symbolic role of Satan is divided into two characters, a man called Lord Asriel and a woman called Mrs Marisa Coulter. On the other hand, their about-turn cannot be considered a *real* character development even though both the public and private purposes of Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter diametrically change at the end of Pullman's story.

Keywords: character-development, fantasy literature, myth-criticism, Satan

1. Introduction: On the Devil's Party

Satan as the embodiment of antagonism has been a recurring character in Judeo-Christian literature. Since the era of Romanticism, he has been interpreted as a tragic, heroic figure (Pál and Újvári, 2001: 364), also as one of the embodiments of man's intellectual freedom (405). The most prominent examples are John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808; 1832) and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1966). The list continues with a British author of children's and adolescents' fiction, namely Philip Pullman (1946-) who retells the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall of Man in his post-modern fantasy trilogy, entitled *His Dark Materials*. The first book is called *Northern Lights/The Golden Compass* (abbreviated as GC) (1995), the second one is *The Subtle Knife* (abbreviated as SK) (1997), and the third one is *The Amber Spyglass* (abbreviated as AS) (2000). For Pullman the most notable part of the Fall in the Bible is the birth of consciousness, which must be celebrated as a decisive moment in the intellectual

* Zsuzsanna Tóth is a Ph. D. Candidate at the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Szeged in Hungary. She is the author of a study entitled "The Hungarian Peculiarities of National Remembrance" which analyses the visualization and memorization of outstanding Hungarian historical characters in *AHEA E-journal* vol. 5 (2012). She conducts research on religion in the Anglo-Saxon literature of the fantastic in general, and Philip Pullman's book trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), in particular. Email: dzsini24@freemail.hu

history of the enlightened man. Consequently, the author positions himself on Satan's side against God, and, with a definite intention of criticising the grand and canonised narrative of Christianity, his imaginative fictional mythology, in other words mythopoesis, revolves around a cosmic fight for the freedom of intellectual and sensual consciousness:

There are two great powers, [...] and they've been fighting since time began. [...] Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger, and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit. (SK 283)

In more details, the followers of an impostor god-figure called the Authority have been against the supporters of a mystic deity, called Dust, who is the embodiment and condition of sensual and intellectual consciousness, i.e. in the traditional sense the Original Sin itself. Now the time has come to finish this ancient war: "[t]his is the last rebellion. Never before have humans and angels, and beings from all the worlds, made a common cause. This is the greatest force ever assembled" (AS 188). The key figures of this combat, also the protagonists of Pullman's trilogy, are two twelve-year old children called Lyra and William, who as the new Eve and the new Adam wander through several parallel universes to fulfil the second, happy Fall so as to save Dust.

His Dark Materials trilogy wittingly disposes close transtextual connections with well-known literary canons that unconsciously or consciously star Satan in the Christian context of questioning the existing power. While John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is the best known literary antecedent of Pullman's novels, the *far more* influential one is William Blake's book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), which is pervaded by the pathos of struggle and the feeling of irreconcilable antagonism. By valuing the so-called "religious impulse" and disliking "organized religion" (Philip Pullman, 2012), the virtually anti-orthodox, but not anti-religious Pullman confesses that

In aligning the rebellious angels with good and freedom, rather than authority, repression and cruelty, I'm in a long tradition. William Blake consciously and Milton unconsciously wrote about this, so I'm in line with the English dissenters." (Cooper 2000: 124)

For this reason, the twofold aim of my paper is, first, to argue that two human beings, called Lord Asriel and Mrs Marisa Coulter, are Pullman's Satan-figures; this is done on the basis of my thematic analysis upon those individual dynamics that these he-Satan and she-Satan as a symbolic androgynous unit create from the traditional satanic roles of the catalyst of the plot, the death-bringer and the seducer. Secondly, I argue that although at the end of Pullman's story both the aims of Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter diametrically change by becoming from antagonists into minor characters helping the protagonists, their about-turn (complete change of opinion) can hardly be considered as a real character development. I doubt whether Satan could go through authentic character-development without losing the characteristics of his or her nature. If not, what kind of character-development does satanic nature make possible? Pullman's guiding principles – "you cannot change what you are, only what you do" (GC 276) and "good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are" (AS 398) – give relevance to these suggestions.

The theoretical position of my analysis is myth criticism, a literary interpretation regarding literary works as expressions or embodiments of recurrent mythic patterns and structures, or of 'timeless' archetypes. The most influential modern myth critic, the Canadian Northrop Frye, claims that "[t]he structural principles of literature are to be derived from archetypal and anagogic criticism, the only kinds that assume a larger contexts of literature as a whole" (Frye, 1973: 134). In this way, Frye is convinced that "[t]he structural principles of literature are as closely related to mythology and comparative religion as those of painting are to geometry" (135).

2. The Resolute Freedom-fighter and the Irresistible Seductress: Philip Pullman's He-Satan and She-Satan

It is not the ontology (because they are not supernatural beings), but the traits and the symbolic roles of two amorally powerful, yet charismatic characters, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter, that make them Pullman's equivalents for Satan. This man and this woman are binary oppositions to each other: as the most powerful antagonists, the former is in the party against the Authority and for Dust, and the latter is in the other party in the cosmic war.

It needs to be clarified what makes a character, notably a human being, into a Satan-figure by going through the cultural history of the eternal Opposer. First and foremost, Neil Forsyth argues that keeping Satan's essential role as opposition in mind, his name "defines a being who can only be contingent: as the adversary, he must always be a function of another, not an independent entity" (Forsyth, 1987: 4). In addition, endowed with an androgynous nature, Satan has been associated with death since the sixteenth century. The German art historian Carl S. Guthke notes that the devil "may adopt one or the other gender in the myth-making imagination of the church fathers, the Middle Ages, and subsequent centuries" (Guthke, 1999: 126). The reason, he explains, is

In earlier centuries the dichotomy of male and female allegories of death [...] could be seen in connection with the identification, common in the Renaissance, of Death and the devil, who for his part was believed to assume either male or female shape, or both. (176)

On this theoretical basis, both Lord Asriel and Mrs Marisa Coulter can be viewed, in a figurative sense, as two death-bringers, Pullman's he-Satan and she-Satan, respectively. It is not surprising that Millicent Lenz characterizes them with a "highly focused, predatory, obsessive mentality" (Lenz, 2005: 8), because both Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter are convinced that the end always justifies the means, involving the abuse of the innocent, ruthless torment and premeditated murder.

The he-Satan, Lord Asriel, is a bachelor aristocrat, an explorer of the North as well as a politician with an imperious and passionate nature. Like Milton's Satan against God, Lord Asriel has a single-minded mission to defeat the tyrannical Authority, the Kingdom of Heaven and all religious institutions so as to establish the Republic of Heaven where everyone will be equal citizens. In spite of being human, Lord Asriel does not lack some supernatural power: as the greatest commander there ever was, "he must have been preparing this [the war] for a long time, for eons. [...] he commands time, he makes it run fast or slow according to his will" (SK 239). In fact Lord Asriel challenges the foundations of traditional Christianity. As the Authority and his believers are so oppressive and cruel, their most resolute antagonist, Pullman's he-Satan is expected to be sympathetic; but he is not. Lord Asriel is a morally

ambiguous character whose daemon[†] is a snow leopard, the symbol of ferocity, strength, and cruelty (Pál and Újvári, 2001: 302); moreover, the leopard in Christianity is the symbol of the Evil, the Antichrist (302). Even Asriel's name implies a capacity for ruthlessness. Donna Freitas calls attention to the fact that the fictional name of Asriel is "an alternative spelling of Azrael, the angel in Jewish and Muslim mythology who severs the soul from the body; that is, the angel of death" (Freitas, 2007: 79). Lord Asriel also severs the link between the soul and the body, with no sign of regret.

The she-Satan, Mrs Coulter is an irresistible *femme fatale* with angelic beauty, the widow of a politician, not only a Scholar, but also a devout agent of the Authority's Church. Obsessed with pursuing a victory over the enemies of her 'God,' the Authority, she is the antagonist of Pullman's fictional deity, Dust. Concerning her personality, in the traditional sense she is the true embodiment of evil:

Corruption and envy and lust for power. Cruelty and coldness. A vicious, probing curiosity. Pure, poisonous, toxic malice. You [Mrs Coulter] have never from your earliest years shown a shred of compassion or sympathy or kindness without calculating how it would return to your advantage. You have tortured and killed without regret or hesitation; you have betrayed and intrigued and gloried in your treachery. You are a cesspit of moral filth. (AS 356)

In accordance with this, her daemon is a golden monkey, the symbol of vanity, luxury and malevolence, thus the Evil in Christian culture (Pál and Újvári, 2001: 318). However, Mrs Coulter's most definite satanic characteristics are irresistible seduction, persuasiveness and falsehood connected to death. She is like the true seductress who, according to Jean Baudrillard, "can only exist in a state of seduction" (Baudrillard, 1990: 86). As for the strategy, "[w]e seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers. In seduction we enact this weakness, and this is what gives seduction its strength" (83). This is how Mrs Coulter convinces the children of the poor to follow her to the North where the scientists of the Church need these kids for cruel experiments:

She looked so angelic in the hissing naphtha light that all the children fell silent.

"We want your help," she said. "You don't mind helping us, do you?"

[†] In Pullman's fiction every human being has a daemon that is the visible manifestation of a character's essence or soul in animal form and functions as the voice of consciousness.

No one could say a word. They all gazed, suddenly shy. They had never seen a lady like this; she was so gracious and sweet and kind that they felt they hardly deserved their good luck, and whatever she asked, they'd give it gladly so as to stay in her presence a little longer (GC 39).

This scene calls for the portrayal of death as two female figures that, Guthke reports, were not always neatly distinguishable from each other in the history of Aestheticism, Symbolism, and Decadence (Guthke, 1999: 186): the angel of death and the seductress whose ontological status “remains suspended between death and the promise of death” (188). The most important child in Pullman’s story, however, *must* resist the demonic Mrs Coulter’s charms to fulfil a cosmic mission.

3. Progression, Change or Just Mere Illusion? The Outcome of Satanic Parenthood

It is the fatherhood of Lord Asriel and the motherhood of Mrs. Coulter that raise the issue of their character-development. The he-Satan and the she-Satan are the biological parents of the new Eve, Lyra, whom they left alone in her infancy. However, twelve years later Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter are ready to unify their goals and sacrifice themselves together to save Lyra’s life and her cosmic task. Even though it suggests that the antagonists’ views have neared to that of the protagonists, therefore Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter become well-developed characters, in fact there is no question of change in their nature.

Both of them are far from being ideal parents. Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter fell in love as soon as they met, later they had a daughter. Unfortunately, Mrs Coulter had been married, and as the baby took after her biological father, she abandoned her. Lord Asriel entrusted an old woman with looking after the baby but when Mr Coulter learnt about his wife’s love child, he intended to murder both the child and her father. In a duel Lord Asriel killed him, and then he sent the baby to Jordan College in Oxford where she was brought up in the belief that she was an orphan and Lord Asriel was her awesome uncle. Lyra is twelve when Mrs Coulter turns up in her life to take her as an assistant to London. Even though later Lord Asriel is revealed as Lyra’s biological father, he does not show any affection for her. For this reason Lyra unconsciously endows other characters, like Iorek Byrnison, with

the role of father. For instance, after the cold welcome Lyra receives from her father, she accuses him in despair:

You en't human, Lord Asriel. You en't my *father*. My *father* wouldn't treat me like that. Fathers are supposed to love their daughters, en't they? You don't love me, and I don't love you, and that's the fact. I love Farder Coram, and I love Iorek Byrnison; I love an armoured bear more'n I love my father. And I bet Iorek Byrnison loves me more'n you do. (GC 323)

While what characterizes Lord Asriel as a bad father is rather indifference, Mrs Coulter as a bad mother is much worse:

Lyra now realized, if she hadn't done so before, that all the fear in her nature was drawn to Mrs. Coulter as a compass needle is drawn to the Pole. (...) the thought of that sweet face and gentle voice, the image of that golden playful monkey, was enough to melt her stomach and make her pale and nauseated. (GC 232-3)

It is hard to deny Millicent Lenz's argument that a mythic archetype is presented in Mrs Coulter who plays the fearsome stepmother role, therefore, "she is better understood as a kind of fairy-tale figure than as a realistic mother" (Lenz, 2001: 155). As the enemy of the rebels led by Lord Asriel, Mrs Coulter even considers the opportunity of murdering her own daughter when she learns that Lyra is going to be the new Eve who will commit the second Fall: "I shall have to destroy her," said Mrs. Coulter, "to prevent another Fall" (SK 278). However, she changes her mind, kidnaps Lyra and keeps her asleep in a deserted mountain in order to protect her from the hired assassins of the Church. Since this moment, Mrs Coulter appears more contradictory and, paradoxically, predictable: "I love Lyra. Where did this love come from? I don't know; it came to me like a thief in the night, and now I love her so much my heart is bursting with it" (AS 362). This forming maternal predictability of the she-Satan is best formulated by Mary Harris Russell according to whom "the quest for maternal identity emerges as the centre of her actions" (Russell, 2005: 216).

As the events progress, both Satan-figures realize that it is also their own interest to give up their previous disagreement (involving Mrs Coulter's realization of the limits of her fundamentalism, which leads to her changing sides), and to cooperate for a common aim to finish the cosmic war by destroying the leader of the enemy. He is called Metatron, the

regent of the old Authority. Lord Asriel says to Mrs Coulter: “We came here to give Lyra time [...] to live and grow up. If we take Metatron to extinction, Marisa, she’ll have that time, and if we go with him [to annihilation], it doesn’t matter” (AS 362). This final and heroic deed unites the He-Satan and the She-Satan once and for all into a symbolic androgynous unit, the manifestation of ancient oneness: “She [Mrs Coulter] sacrificed herself with Lord Asriel to fight the angel [Metatron] and make the world safe for Lyra. They could not have done it alone, but together they did it” (AS 429-430). Lisa Hopkins points out that “Pullman, with typical lack of sentimentality, has already shown us that love for one’s own child is entirely compatible with the most extreme forms of selfishness and ruthlessness” (Hopkins, 2005: 54). Is Hopkins really right in talking about parental love? If it was not for the importance of Lyra’s destiny to repair cosmic balance, I am not so sure whether either Lord Asriel or Mrs Coulter would ever pay more attention to their daughter than in her infancy. Although in the end Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter appreciate Lyra and her cosmic task of being the new Eve, the girl herself does not even know about the heroic self-sacrifice of her parents for a long time.

4. Conclusion

Even though Philip Pullman’s two Satan-figures, Lord Asriel, the resolute freedom-fighter and Mrs Marisa Coulter, the dangerous seductress, seem to be dynamic characters, my myth-critical analysis attempts to show that their character development is not about improvement, in the sense that both of them remain what they are. The change concerns what they *have done*. All the two Satan-figures could do for their daughter is not to be parents in the way ordinary humans do (to kiss her, to tell her bedtime stories). By sacrificing themselves, they give their daughter a second life in a whole new world where the natural (sexuality, self-knowledge, and ultimately growing up) can be natural thanks to the absence of institutional restrictions in the name of some god. In the end, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter apply the power of their satanic nature – the catalyst, the death-bringer and the seducer – to show a grandiose present attributed to supernatural beings to Dust, the true deity, the new Eve and Adam, and all conscious beings in Pullman’s mythopoeisis. This is how the British author proves to be on the party of William Blake’s devil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793).

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